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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the six levels of meaning in reading and discusses them in relation to the subskills which the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) reader must acquire in order to fully understand the author's message. The contents include: "Meaning," which presents the six levels of meaning--knowing, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating; "Knowing," which discusses knowing word structure, recognizing sentence structure, knowing word function, knowing the function of punctuation, knowing denotative meaning, and recalling specific information; "Comprehending," which looks at understanding of the message and restating the message; "Applying," which discusses forming generalizations, making inferences, and drawing conclusions; "Analyzing," which discusses indentifying sequences, identifying main ideas, detecting connotative meaning, identifying figurative language, and discovering relationships; "Synthesizing," which looks at creating new ideas; and "Evaluating," which discusses self-appraising of biases, judging information as valid or invalid, evaluating information as fact or opinion, assessing propaganda, and evaluating the quality of the written word. (WR)

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MEANING LEVELS IN READING

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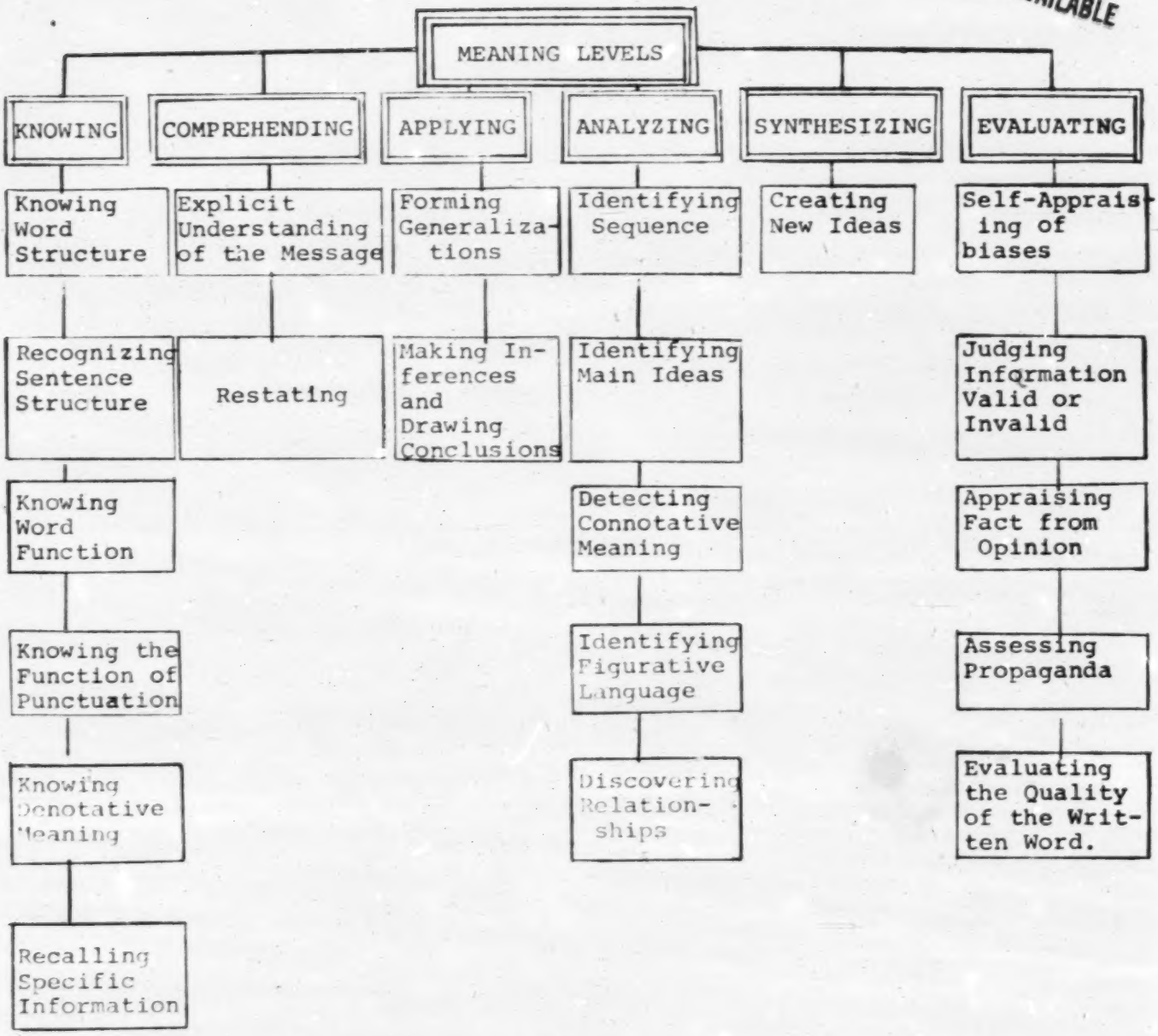

FIGURE VI

Adapted from Dayton Y. Roberts "Action Levels of Cognitive Behavior" and Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

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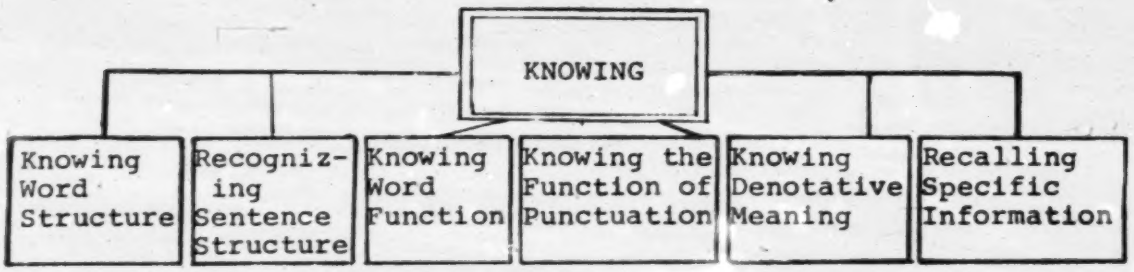
MEANING

Meaning is to the printed word as understanding is to the spoken word. It is of little relevance that a speaker has used well chosen words to transmit his message unless there is a listener who can accept the stimulus and extract the meaning which the speaker intended. An author may clearly express a thought in print, but the reader may not understand the meaning of the message even though he is able to identify all the words. The student needs to be taught how to extract the meaning the author intended.

There are six levels at which the reader can gain meaning from an author's message. These are knowing, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. The beginning reader should master these six levels in order to gain meaning from the printed word; but as the student becomes a more able reader, these skills should develop according to his reading proficiency. The ESL adult reader's progress through the hierarchy of meaning levels will depend greatly upon the extent to which he attained the meaning levels in his native language prior to reading English as a second language. Within each of these levels, there are sets of skills which the reader must acquire to gain meaning. Figure VI illustrates this.

KNOWING

Knowing is the least complex level of learning. It is, however, most essential in obtaining meaning from print. The skills which must be acquired at this level are knowledge of word structure, sentence structure, word functions, punctuation, denotative meaning and recall. The following diagram illustrates the skills of the knowing level.



KNOWING WORD STRUCTURE

At this level the student is familiar with word structure and usage through previous language experience. However, there are several specific areas of English word structure that may present particular difficulty to ESL students. The possessive form and its correlation to the singular and plural forms of the same word is

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one of these problems.

For example: The singular form of *boy* is *boy*. The plural form of *boy* is *boys* and the possessive form of *boy* is *boy's*.

The definite and the indefinite article is another word structure problem as well as adjective, adverb and noun forms of the same word. Still another difficulty is the contraction when it is substituted for the long form. Word forms unique to English are especially confusing. For example, *it* denoting neuter gender in English may not exist in other languages.

RECOGNIZING SENTENCE STRUCTURE

At this level of meaning the student recognizes sentence structure and through position of words in the sentence he is able to gain some knowledge from the print. English sentence structure is particularly difficult because of interrogative statements with inverted verbs, negative statements, prepositional phrases, and statements of apposition. Signal words which can help the reader anticipate the structural flow of a sentence are listed below. Signals may mark the beginnings of phrases or clauses, such as:

Phrase Signals

above	*beside*	*near*	*to*	*within*
across	*by*	*off*	*toward*	
along	*from*	*on*	*underneath*	
around	*in*	*out*	*up*	
behind	*inside*	*outside*	*upon*	
below	*into*	*through*	*with*	

Clause Signals

after	*now*	*until*	*who*
as	*once*	*what*	*whose*
before	*so*	*when*	*why*
if	*than*	*where*	
like	*through*	*which*	

Other signals may indicate questions, negation or be used to intensify a statement:

Question Signals

be	*how much*	*where*	*why*
do	*how often*	*which*	*will*
how	*when*	*who*	*whose*

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Negation Signals

aren't	*isn't*	*not*	*shouldn't*
don't	*never*	*nothing*	*won't*
haven't	*no*	*couldn't*	*wasn't*
hasn't			*weren't*
can't			*wouldn't*

Intensifying Signals

any	*least*	*quite*	*so*
awful	*less*	*rather*	*somewhat*
awfully	*more*	*real*	*somehow*
fairly	*more or less*	*really*	*too*
just	*pretty*	*right*	*very*

Finally there are words which express the relationship of ideas in a sentence:

Coordinating Conjunction Signals

both...and	*not only...but also*
now...now	*when...then*
either...or	*while...yet*
not only...but	*although...still*
whether...or	*if...then*
where...where	*so...as*
although...yet	*not...but*
as...as	*if...still*
now...then	*while...still*
neither...nor	

The ESL student learning to read English should be particularly aware of these signals in order to make the sentence a meaningful unit. Word order is a specific syntactical problem in reading English as a second language, which may originate in the reader's native language and might not be overcome by knowledge of signals alone. Depending on his native language, a second language, reader may have difficulties coping with placement of adjectives before the noun, placement of the verb in the verb phrase of a sentence, placement of adverbs of frequency, or placement of phrases and clauses.

KNOWING WORD FUNCTION

At this level of learning, the student must have an understanding of words and their function in a sentence. For example, verbs signify an action, nouns name persons, places or things. Once

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understood, the second language reader can anticipate the function of the words through signals. Some examples of signals which mark the function of words in a sentence are:

Noun Signals

a	*another*	*our*
an	*my*	*their*
the	*your*	*most*
one, two...	*this*	*his*
	that	*her*

Verb Signals

be	*may*	*get*
have	*will*	*go*
do	*shall*	*start*
can	*must*	*keep*
would	*could*	*need*
		should

Adjectival Suffix Signals

-able	*-al*	*-an*
-er	*-ary*	*-ate*
-ed	*-en*	*-ful*
-ic	*-ical*	*-ine*
-ly	*-less*	*-like*
-ish	*-our*	*-some*
-y	*-ible*	*-ant*
-ent	*-ory*	

Derivational Suffix Signals

Adverb - ly ment
Adjective (comparison) - er est
Plural - s es
Possessive' - 's s'

KNOWING THE FUNCTION OF PUNCTUATION

Once the student recognizes sentences as expressed ideas which can stand alone, he must next know the significance of the proper punctuation to interpret the author's message fully or identify change of speaker.

For example, the message *Did he drink wine?* can be interpreted one way if punctuated with a question mark. It is a very different message if an exclamation mark is used: *Did he drink wine!*

The transfer of information about punctuation from the stu-

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dent's native language to English is totally dependent upon that first language. It is possible that position of punctuation is different or that punctuation is non-existent in the native language.

KNOWING DENOTATIVE MEANING

The student who knows word function is able to begin to understand the message which the author intended. He comes to the reading process with a set of experiences to help him understand the printed word. If the reader has no experience which he can draw upon and if he cannot understand the meaning from context, he must look for the prescribed or denotative meaning. From this dictionary definition the reader formulates his meaning for the word and begins to understand the printed word.

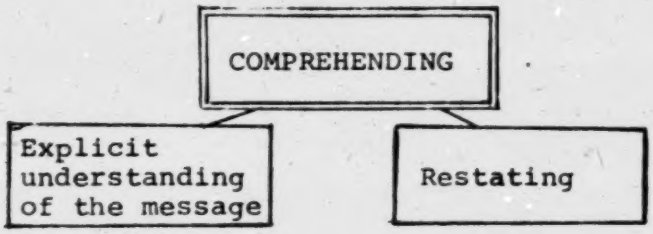
RECALLING SPECIFIC INFORMATION

The reader is also able to recall specific information after reading a short selection. He is able to answer *who, what, where* and *when* questions without referring to the text. It is important for the teacher to ask for specific information which is explicitly stated in the reading. The student should be able to answer any questions which ask for specific information and are explicitly stated.

COMPREHENDING

The next level requires the information gained from the knowing level and builds upon this to allow the student to understand experiences and impressions which the author is relating.

There are two skills at the comprehending level as illustrated below:



EXPLICIT UNDERSTANDING OF THE MESSAGE

At this level the reader is able to comprehend only those experiences which are explicitly described. The author's message is totally realized only if the impressions he is describing are ab-

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solutely clear.

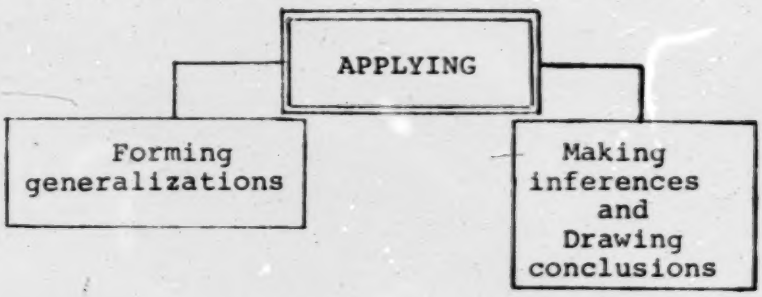
In the sentence *I discovered gold*, there is no doubt of the experience the author is trying to describe. However, in the sentence *All that glitters is not gold*, there is need for interpretation. The student, at this level of meaning, should not be expected to understand this kind of statement.

RESTATING

Restating is another skill which is necessary at this level. After reading a short paragraph the student is able to retell orally what he has read. He is able to use his own words to express the author's message immediately after the reading.

APPLYING

In order to reach the third meaning level of applying the student should have mastered the knowing and comprehending skills. He is able to use the information gained to form generalizations, make inferences and draw his own conclusions. The following diagram illustrates those skills necessary at this level:



FORMING GENERALIZATIONS

The student begins to develop the concept that reading involves more than what the words express directly. He formulates generalizations from the information gained through the reading.

MAKING INFERENCES AND DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

The student is also able to apply the information which he has gained to make inferences and answer questions which ask *why* as contrasted to the *who*, *what*, or *where* questions which appear at less sophisticated meaning levels. Through the formulation of generalizations and inferences, the student is now able to predict outcomes and draw his own conclusions.

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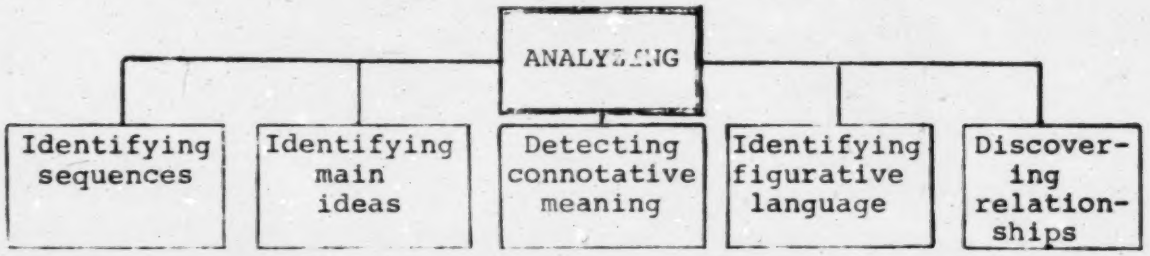
Proficiency at this meaning level is built upon the previous levels of knowing, comprehending, and applying. The student is now able to examine more closely what has been read and can identify specific information in a selection.

The skills to be acquired at this level are sequencing, identifying main ideas, discovering relationships, identifying figurative language and detecting connotative meaning.



IDENTIFYING SEQUENCES

Sequencing occurs at this level. The reader is able to discriminate between events as they have been presented. He recognizes the order of the presentation and should be able to recall the information in the stated sequence.

IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS

The student identifies the main idea of a paragraph. If the main idea is expressed explicitly the reader can state or underline it. If the main idea is implied, then he is able to recognize the topic or subject of the implied main idea.

DETECTING CONNOTATIVE MEANING

In order to detect the implied or connotative meaning of words, the reader must have knowledge of the prescribed or denotative meanings. Once the reader knows the denotative meanings, he recognizes that words may inherently suggest attitudes and meanings which may be very different from those of their apparent synonyms. For example the words *obese* and *chubby* may be identified as synonyms for *fat*. But as each is examined more closely it is apparent that each word is subtlety different from the next.

IDENTIFYING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

It is important that the student be able to identify figurative language in a selection. Simile, metaphor, hyperbole and personification are the most common figures of speech in American English writings. It is necessary that the student understand

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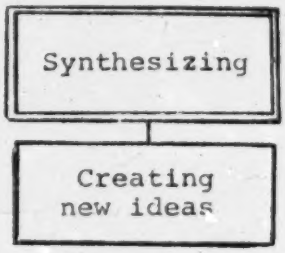
these forms of figurative language and that he recognize them in a selection. He should also understand that very often the author's message can be written at the literal as well as the figurative level. It is necessary, then, that the reader be able to express both meanings of a passage when applicable.

DISCOVERING RELATIONSHIPS

Discrimination between relationship of words and ideas as expressed by the author is inherent in this level. Perceiving the relationship of words as they appear in analogies is one aspect of discovering the word/statement relationship. Another is the ability to compare and contrast. Third is understanding the cause-effect relationship of ideas. The statement *"If it rains, then you will get wet"* is a cause-effect statement. The *if* signals the cause (*when* is also considered a cause signal); while the *then* signals the effect statement.

SYNTHESIZING

This level of meaning is built upon knowing, comprehending, applying, and analyzing. The reader is now able to combine the ideas which he has read with ideas which he already has had to create new ideas.



CREATING NEW IDEAS

The reader has reached a level of sophistication which allows him to choose only that information which he finds to be necessary to allow him to formulate a new idea. For the first time, the message of the author may be used for more than the author might have intended.

EVALUATING

It is only at this most sophisticated meaning level that the student combines all previous levels of knowing, comprehending applying, analyzing and synthesizing to judge the information which he has gained.

The skills of the evaluating level are self-appraising biases, judging information valid or invalid, appraising factual information

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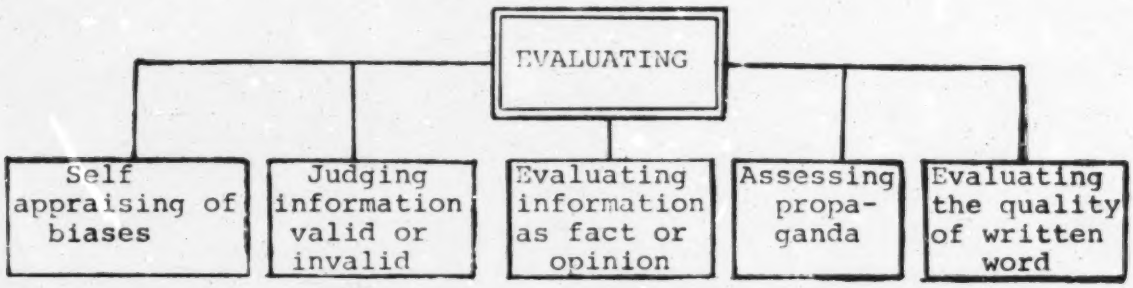
from opinion, assessing information as propaganda, and evaluating the quality of the written word.


EVALUATING
Self appraising of biases
Judging information valid or invalid
Evaluating information as fact or opinion
Assessing propa-ganda
Evaluating the quality of written word

SELF-APPRAISING OF BIASES

Before a student fairly evaluates what he reads, it is of ultimate importance that he recognize and understand his own biases. Fair judgement of the author's message can only be made after the reader sets his own biases aside and can read objectively.

JUDGING INFORMATION VALID OR INVALID

The student is able to judge whether the information gained is valid or invalid. In order to do so he might ask these questions:

Does the author use half-truths?
Does the author use exaggerated claims?
Does the author use ambiguous terminology?
Does the author quote out of context?
Does the author omit facts?

EVALUATING INFORMATION AS FACT OR OPINION

The reader is also able to evaluate information as either fact or opinion. It is important to the total meaning that factual information be evaluated differently from opinion. In order to make a point, an author might use an emotionally charged statement to support an opinion. The reader should know when such statement weigh an argument in favor.

ASSESSING PROPAGANDA

The reader first needs to understand what propaganda meaning is. Next, he identifies the strong points and weak points of the argument and examines whether or not he is convinced of the message that the written material is trying to convey.
The student uses the following checklist to assess propaganda::

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What thought is the author conveying?
To what emotions does the material appeal?
What is the implied message?
How can the message be made more effective?
Does the author get the message across?

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF WRITTEN WORD

The student is sophisticated enough to evaluate the style the author uses and whether or not the message is of good quality. In order to do this the following questions should be answered:

Are there inconsistencies in the message?
Are there non-sequitors in the content?
Is the word choice appropriate?
Does the author use imagery accurately and effectively?

SUMMARY

There are six levels of meaning: knowing, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Within each of these levels there are sets of subskills which the reader must acquire in order to fully understand the author's message. The level of meaning an ESL adult has attained will depend greatly upon the extent to which these levels have been mastered in his native language.

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